

Three Sculptors

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

Chris Wilmarth

John Duff

Peter Charles

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Three Sculptors

Exhibition organized and text written by
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In the past twenty years, the practice of sculpture in this country has been dominated by two successive, if somewhat overlapping, episodes. The first was characterized by the production of severely geometric, industrially-fabricated works in a style most commonly described as Minimalist. The second saw the introduction of large-scale, often very abstract sculptures into the public space. Both episodes revealed sculpture to be wrestling with a set of rigorous constraints. In the case of Minimalism, they were formal and ideological: a desire to undercut the preciousness of the art object led to the use of primary forms and industrial production techniques, leaving the sculptures executed in this style with little visual seductiveness and no trace of the artist's hand. Moreover, Minimalist sculptors sought to make their work situational, so it would not be a thing unto itself but have its form and character determined by the space in which it was placed, usually by taking cues from the surrounding geometries. This was a highly codified and cerebral art.

The largely melancholy flirtation with the public space forced other constraints on sculpture. The abstract public monuments of the early 1970s and beyond were often insensitively sited, overwhelmed by the scale of adjacent buildings or plunked down in featureless plazas. They were frequently asked to do the impossible: to redeem a banal urban environment. At the same time, they were often vilified by a public that

was troubled by the disjunction between the traditions of public art and its contemporary manifestations. That this difficulty still awaits resolution is even now being demonstrated by the unhappy case of the Richard Serra sculpture *Tilted Arc* at the Federal Building in lower Manhattan, which the General Services Administration is planning to remove because of public hostility to the work.

Much of the most interesting public sculpture in the past decade has been created with these problems in mind—that is, with an eye toward reconciling the forms of contemporary sculpture with the public audience. Strategies ranging from the reintroduction of narrative content and new forms of commemoration to the merging of aesthetic and utilitarian objectives have produced a new and public-spirited sculpture by artists ranging from such familiar figures as Isamu Noguchi and George Segal to younger talents like Siah Amajani, Scott Burton, and Nancy Holt. Success, in this instance, is being won most frequently by those artists who, like architects and other design professionals, can work within the public planning process and adapt their artistic objectives to the requirements of the site, the ideas of the client, and the nature of the surrounding community.

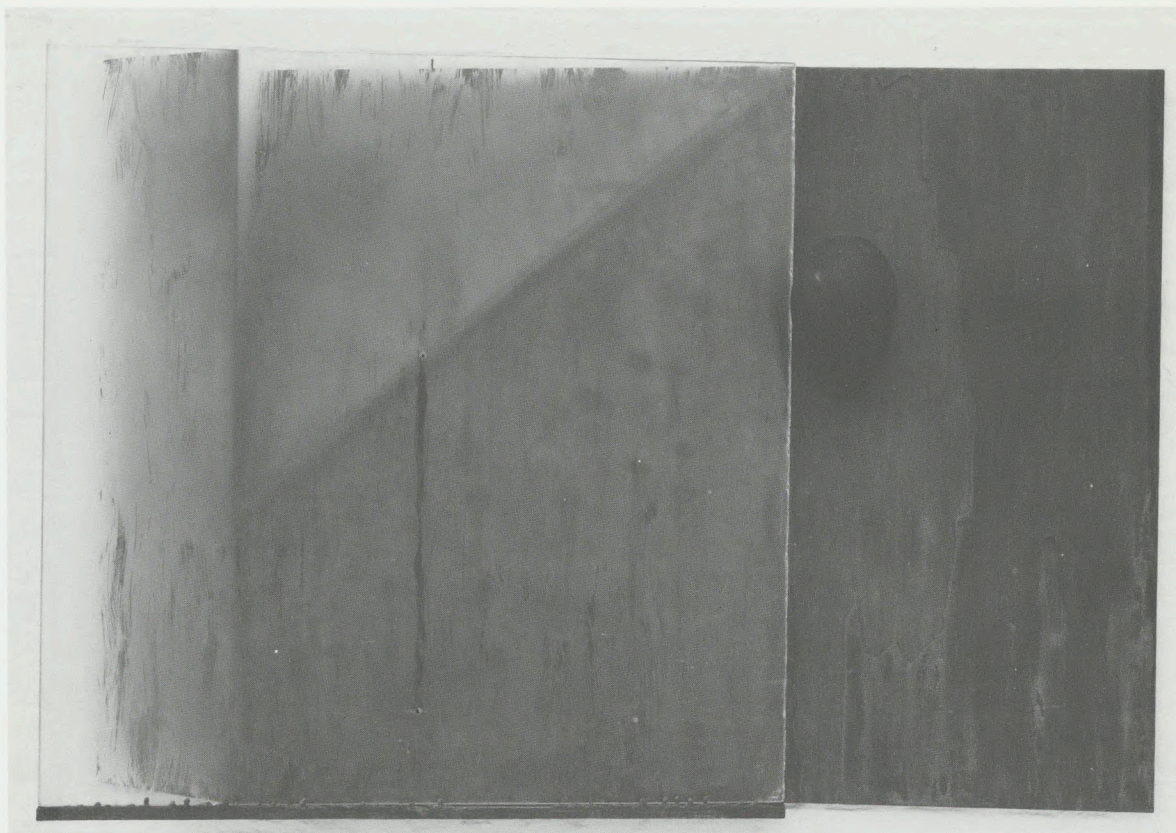
While the attention of the art world has thus been drawn to these highly visible episodes, something else has quietly been occurring. It has been taking place among a group of sculptors who are now in their mid-thirties and forties,

many of whom were in art school in the heyday of Minimalism, but who have departed significantly both from that style and from the concerns of recent public sculpture. They cannot be said to constitute a school or movement of their own, but they share some points of departure. Most pronounced are affinities of scale and technique. As distinct from the monumentalism that has characterized so much recent sculpture in general and public sculpture in particular, these artists cleave to human scale. As against the machine-tooled look of Minimalism and the impersonal fabrication of much public sculpture, they affirm the worth of the artist's touch. Although their materials may be industrially produced, their sculptures are distinctly made by hand. And they present their materials directly, neither disguising them with elaborate finishes or forcing them to take shapes extrinsic to the medium.

Affinities in subject matter and style are more difficult to pinpoint, but are evident nonetheless. While the imagery of these artists is still derived somewhat from the vocabulary of geometric abstraction, its antecedents are far more diverse—back through the quirky abstractions of Eva Hesse, Lee Bontecou, and Louise Bourgeois to the work of the classic modernists, especially Brancusi and the constructivists. Allusions to natural processes and forms, even the human figure, are discernable. Indeed, there is a sense of deliberately exploring the territory between pure abstraction and representation and between literalness and ambiguity. Moreover,

there seems to be a renewed commitment to the modernist notion of sculpture as a thing unto itself—not sculpture as idea or process or environment, nor sculpture as an expression of shared public values, but sculpture as something with its own logic, its own purpose, and its own meaning, and these derived not from external sources but from the heart and mind of the artist. As distinct from the public impulse, this sculpture affirms the primacy of personal sensibilities. In sum, much recent sculpture bears witness to a shift away from the formal and ideological constraints that characterized much of the sculpture of the past twenty years toward a freer approach to form, materials, and technique.

Quite a number of sculptors can be associated with this quiet revision. Some have been with us for quite some time, and have achieved a measure of recognition: Lynda Benglis, Martin Puryear, Joel Shapiro, and Mia Westerlund Roosen. Others are just emerging: Tom Butter in New York, Yuriko Yamaguchi in Washington. Sculptors on both coasts are involved in these new explorations, as exemplified by the Los Angeles artist Mark Lere. The three sculptors presented here—Chris Wilmarth, John Duff, and Peter Charles—while not themselves the complete measure of this new activity, can be taken to represent much of its range, its concerns, and its achievements.



Street Leaf, (From Mayagüez) 1978-86
steel and glass
48 x 72 x 9 inches
Collection of Asher B. Edelman, New York

Moment (on an Island) 1984-86 (right)
bronze, steel, and glass
94 x 36 x 21 inches
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York

Chris Wilmarth was born in Northern California in 1943; he left the Bay Area for New York at the age of seventeen to study at Cooper Union, where he received his B.F.A. in 1965. He then worked for a time as a studio assistant to Tony Smith, whom he describes as being very supportive of him and his work. Yet he never entered the orbit of Smith's style. Wilmarth's drawings and sculptures from these years show more the line of Matisse in the case of the former and the materials and forms of Brancusi in the latter. Indeed, Wilmarth recalls feeling that the forms of Minimalism were not suited to what he wanted to express: interior things, things like moods of longing, of reverie, or of loss. Nor could they serve to designate, as he wished to do, the many components of the environment that had by then so fully come to be his own:

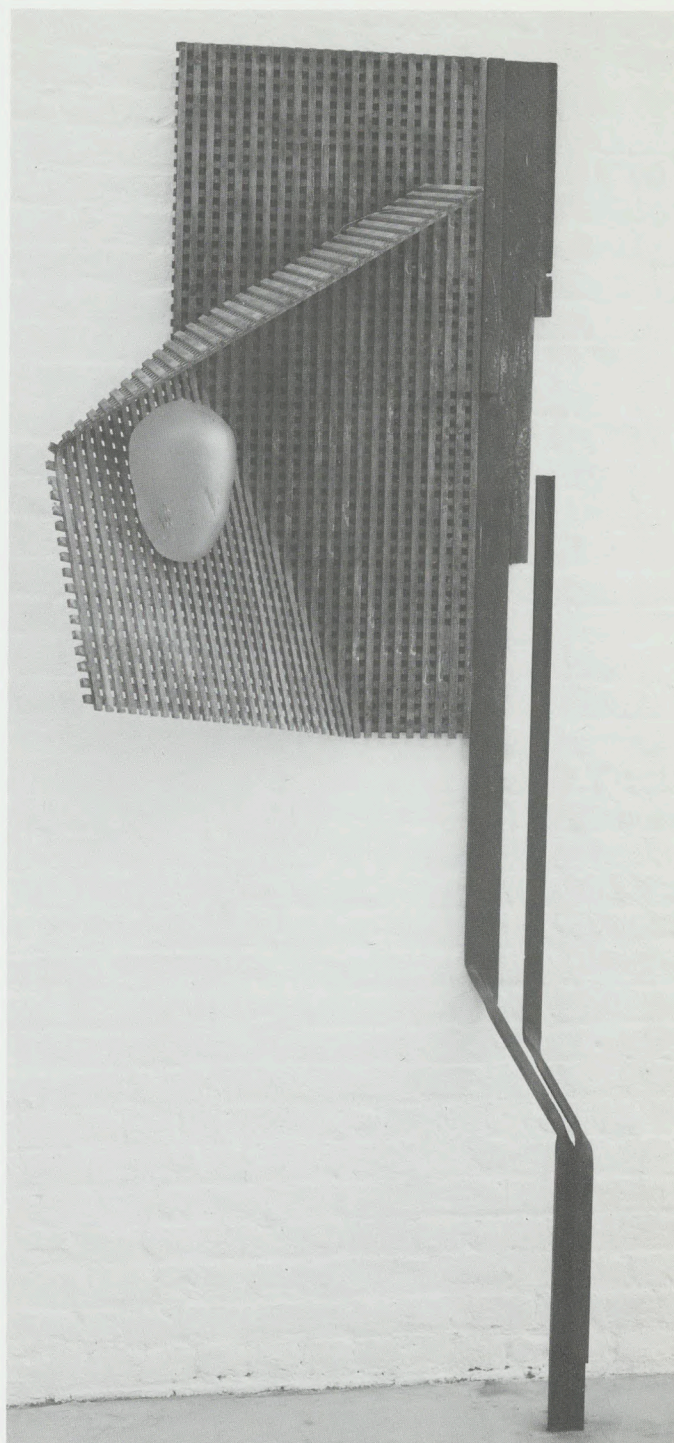
lower Manhattan. Its particular conjunction of marine and terrestrial, human and mechanistic elements, its shadows and light reflected off water and glass, were both the place of his existence and the one he wished to evoke in his sculpture.

Brancusi's juxtapositions of polished metal or stone with rough-hewn wood became the starting point for Wilmarth's own investigations—first of the possibilities of conjoined glass and wood, then glass and steel. Through the seventies he worked in the latter materials, often in series. Steel was cut and folded; glass was cut, etched, bent, and suspended from wire. Some works were evocations of place—steel architectures embraced by etched glass, redolent of water or atmosphere—others seemed to designate, in their simple

verticality and their scale, the human presence. In the early eighties came a series entitled *Breath* that were inspired by seven Mallarmé poems.

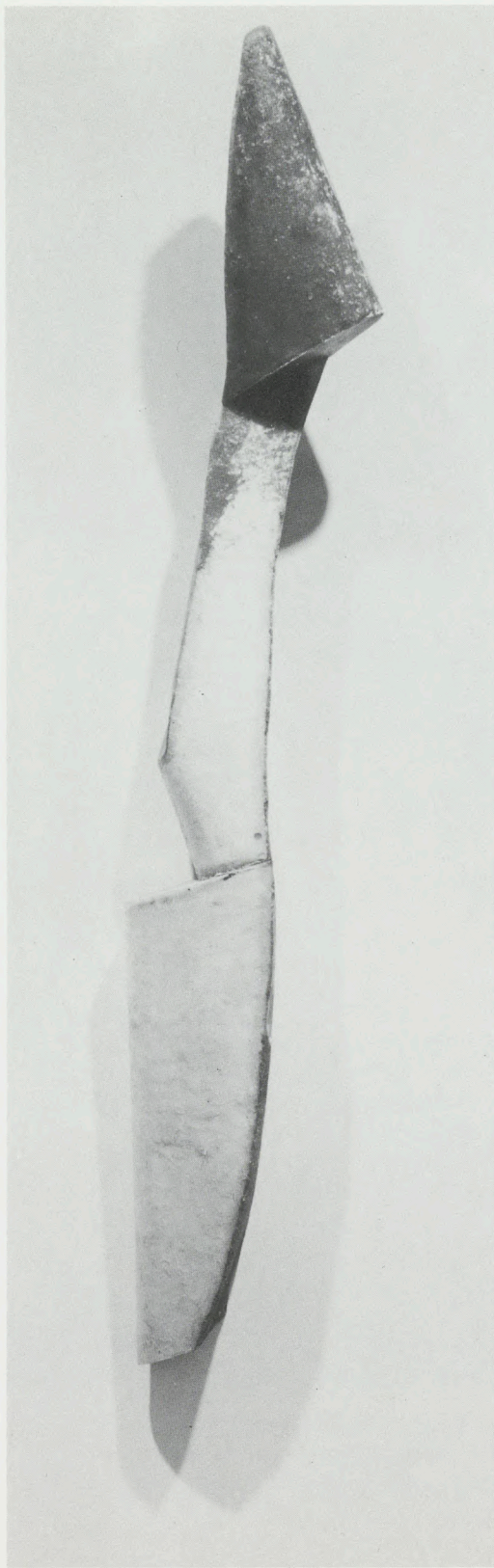
Wilmarth's recent work has become ever more complex in its form, while maintaining the complexity of its references—though these seem now to be more often to states of being, rather than to places. *Street Leaf* (From *Mayagüez*), 1978-86, is a transitional work. The folded sheet steel and etched plate glass of the seventies work are still there, but the steel has been gouged with an end mill and etched with acid, and a blown and etched glass element floats over it. This ovoid form—head and germ cell, as in Brancusi—affirms the interior, spiritual, human presence again. The title, according to Wilmarth, alludes not to a thing, but to "a person, a condition," a condition, one extrapolates, of concurrent toughness and frailty, of shrewdness and vulnerability. Mayagüez, Wilmarth adds, is the birthplace of Celadon, a writer whose first effort was published in the catalogue to the artist's most recent exhibition at Hirschl & Adler Modern in New York. The exact identity of this writer Wilmarth does not care to divulge, but Celadon's knowledge of the artist's life and moods is rich enough to make her seem like a kind of female alter ego to him.

Her Sides of Me, *Delancey Backs*, and *Moment*, all completed within the last year, are composed of slightly different materials, but share technical features. Wilmarth works by forming a plywood mock-up of the sculpture in his studio, then taking it to the factory where the actual piece is made. The sheet bronze or steel is cut and folded, then variously milled, etched, and ground to create the surface drawing, color, and texture. It is important to note that the pieces are not fabricated for Wilmarth—he is present in the factory, working alongside the technicians, often doing the work himself. "The machines I'm allowed to use, I use," he explains. The blown



glass elements are made by a similar, collaborative process, this one with master glass blowers from the California College of Arts and Crafts.

Like *Street Leaf*, these sculptures are enigmas. *Her Sides of Me*, with its bifurcated form—the two glass elements



She 1985
fiberglass and enamel paint
82¾ x 17½ x 12½ inches
Mr. and Mrs. Michael M. Rea

separated by the gougings and a fold in the sheet bronze—seems to suggest both the quest for union within a relationship and the dualities implicit in any single personality. *Delancey Backs* seems, at first glance, more unitary, almost totemic. But it too is bifurcated, with a sheet steel core separating two sheet bronze surfaces on the vertical element, two glass pieces attached to that, and two very distinct surfaces on the bronze wall unit behind. *Moment*, like its title ("as in Epiphany," says Wilmarth) suggests transience in its form: parts of it seem to be falling away from the wall, and the glass element appears precariously perched on a sloping ground.

John Duff's work is equally enigmatic. Its superficial simplicity of form and its apparent abstractness belie a remarkable complexity of technique and intent. Duff works in cast fiberglass, a translucent material that he paints, with extraordinary effects, on the inside. He begins by forming simple, usually curved, geometric shapes in plaster on half-inch bent steel armatures. Using a variety of tools—wood and metal, straight and curved—he builds up and scoops out the plaster until he has a positive form that satisfies him. A plaster mold is formed around this, usually in several pieces. This becomes the negative into which the fiberglass is painted. The fiberglass parts are removed from the mold, taped temporarily together, and sealed with resin poured inside the piece.

As often as not, the fiberglass form itself is then manipulated. Duff cuts it apart, pivots elements, and reattaches them. Open areas are resculpted in plaster, cast and affixed. A hole is drilled into a seam, and enamel paints are poured inside. This internal coloration intensifies the structural complexity of the works: surfaces are ambiguously transparent and opaque. Throughout, Duff's method is quite intuitive: "I'm not a control freak," he says. "It's not until you're open to the possibilities that you're really working and growing."

What seem, then, to be such effortless creations are in fact highly intricate. In this sense, the sculptures suggest powerful analogies to natural processes and forms, such as cell division, the structure of sea shells or crystals, or the growth of plants. Duff acknowledges a kinship with the tradition of biomorphic abstraction, as found in the work of Henry Moore, Arp, and again, Brancusi. At the same time, he affirms that his intent is "to connect with nature not on the level of appearances, but of effect." And this he achieves with distinctly inorganic materials. "I want it (the sculpture) to be an artifact of nature and at the same time manmade—to reconcile the organic and the mechanistic." This reconciliation of opposites is reinforced by his formal strategy, which descends, ultimately, from the cubist collage. Duff's organically derived forms are broken apart and presented as wedges and facets and oscillating surfaces.

Although born in Lafayette, Indiana, Duff grew up in Southern California, where his parents moved when he was eighteen months old. At age fifteen he had his first exposure to fiberglass, repairing surfboards in Newport Beach—Duff, as a teenager, was an avid surfer. He enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute planning to concentrate in ceramics, but soon moved on to sculpture (his ceramic work, he reports, was "corny"). In San Francisco, he was aware of the work of artists such as Manuel Neri, Joan Brown, and Bruce Conner, and admired the combined "funkiness" and commitment to observed subject matter that characterized Bay Area art in the sixties. His closest affinities at the time, he recalls, were to the work of Bruce Nauman, with its "play of thought," and its free use of media and techniques.

Duff began then his own experiments in various media, which he kept up after his move to New York in 1967. From 1969 to 1974 he worked only in fiberglass, but then gave it up for six



Twist Device 1984
fiberglass and acrylic paint
40½ x 11¾ x 20½ inches
Private Collection

years. "I couldn't stand the material anymore," he recalls, particularly because of the health risk. But "nothing else ever connected as much," so he returned to fiberglass in 1980 with improved facilities for working safely with the material.

The work of **Peter Charles** seems, at first glance, more literal than that of either Wilmarth or Duff. His forms bear clearer relationships than theirs to observed objects, especially vessels of various sorts. But their references are multiple and ambiguous. *Enigma*, for example, is composed of base, vessel, and an ascending line of steel. The vessel alone brings to mind the proportions of the classical Greek vase, but taken together with the ribbon of steel, it recalls the spareness and elegance of Ikebana—the tradition of Japanese floral arrangement. *Bright Vessel with Red and Black Shelf*—a polished steel vessel containing a three-part steel drawing, all resting on a red and black lacquered base—again suggests a vase, but also a simplified African mask with horns. Other works use the vessel to denote the figure. *Four Increments of 24"*, while composed in accordance with a numerical formula, combines vessel and base to suggest head, torso, and legs. In *Bronze Vessel and Organic Forms*, the bronze vessel becomes the torso, while the linear steel elements—with a leanness that recalls the work of Giacometti—suggest head and limbs.

Charles was born in Washington, D.C. in 1943. He received a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1965; there, he was a painter of a "conservative" bent. He attended graduate school at Yale, earning his M.F.A. in 1967. His first year there he was a roommate of Jonathan Borofsky's, an experience, he recalls, that "opened me up a lot." His artistic vocabulary, however, can be seen to be closer to that of his teachers: the sculptor James Rosati and the painters Al Held and Jack Tworikov, all of whom are associated—though in varying degrees—with

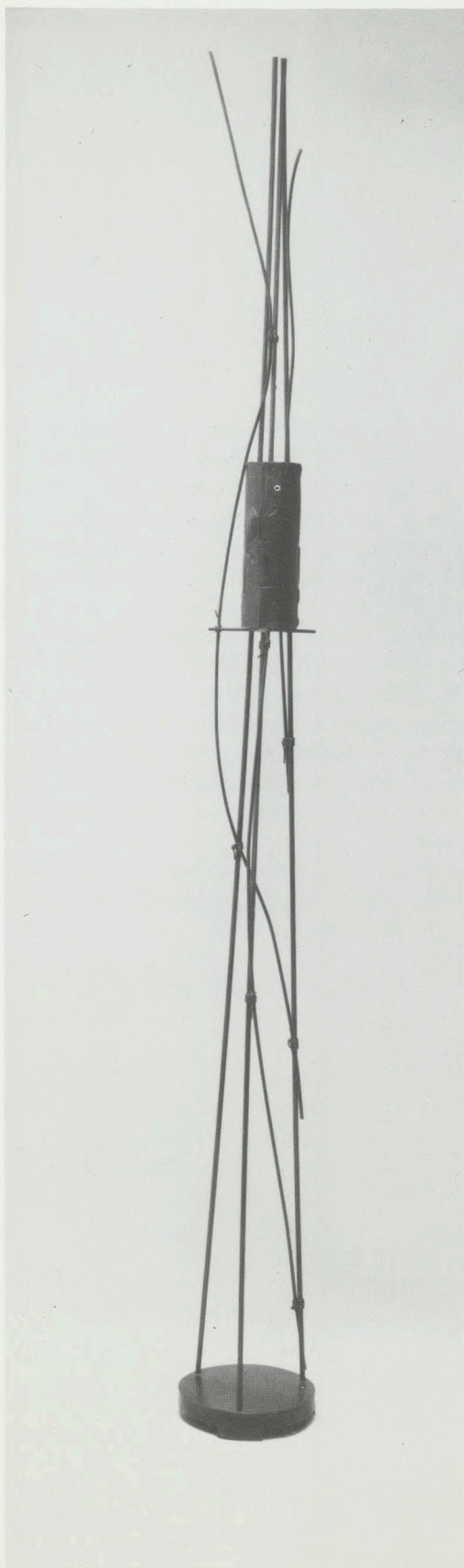


Enigma 1986

steel

89 x 10 x 10 inches

Collection of Homer & Durham Advertising, Ltd.,
New York



geometric abstraction. But Charles credits them with being very open-minded: Rosati he describes as "an artist's artist," who introduced him to many different people; Tworok taught by "bringing together (people of) disparate sensibilities and letting them fight it out."

It is not surprising, then, that although Charles employs an essentially geometric vocabulary, he straddles the line between abstraction and representation to achieve his particularly allusive results. And just as his references are multiple, so are his art-historical antecedents. When Charles combines rectangular forms and a polished steel surface, David Smith's *Cubi* sculptures are clearly in the background. But otherwise, the analogies to Smith are distant: most of Smith's work was insistently open—planar—and structurally ambiguous, while most of Charles's is volumetric, with a central spine around which the form is logically organized. The monolithic character of Charles's work is closer in spirit to that of Brancusi, a similarity strengthened by the consistency with which Charles makes the base an integral part of the sculpture.

Although he has also worked in wood and bronze, most of Charles's recent sculptures are made by using templates to cut forms from sheets of rolled steel. Pieces are bent and welded from the outside to create the individual units; units are then bolted together. The joints are ground and the surfaces are machine and hand sanded—not to a level of perfection, but to that point where they appear both refined and handmade. The steel is either left polished or treated with a chemical that patinates it, bringing out the dark, surprisingly muted tones inherent in hot-rolled steel.

Bronze Vessel and Organic Forms 1986
steel and bronze
96 x 9½ x 9½ inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel, Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Works in the Exhibition

Chris Wilmarth

Street Leaf, (From Mayaguez) 1978-86
steel and glass
48 x 72 x 9 inches
Collection of Asher B. Edelman, New York

Delancy Backs 1983-86
bronze, steel, and glass
96 x 50 x 26 inches
Collection of Asher B. Edelman, New York

Her Sides of Me 1983-86
bronze, steel, and glass
72 x 41½ x 8 inches
The Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles

Moment (on an Island) 1984-86
bronze, steel, and glass
94 x 36 x 21 inches
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York

Photos: Jerry L. Thompson

John Duff

Twist Device 1984
fiberglass and acrylic paint
40½ x 11¾ x 20½ inches
Private Collection

Cleft Wedge 1985
fiberglass, enamel paint, and shellac
76 x 12 x 6½ inches
Dr. and Mrs. Sheldon E. Krasnow

She 1985
fiberglass and enamel paint
82¾ x 17½ x 12½ inches
Mr. and Mrs. Michael M. Rea

Silver Shrimp 1985
fiberglass and enamel paint
41 x 19½ x 11 inches
Courtesy Blum Helman Gallery, New York

Split Disc 1986
fiberglass and enamel paint
48¼ x 25½ x 23¾ inches
The Oliver-Hoffman Family Collection

Woolongong 1987
fiberglass and enamel paint
76 x 39 x 21¼ inches
Courtesy Blum Helman Gallery, New York

Photos: Bill Jacobson

Peter Charles

Bright Vessel with Red and Black Shelf 1986
stainless steel and lacquer on steel
26 x 12 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Bronze Vessel and Organic Forms 1986
steel and bronze
96 x 9½ x 9½ inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel, Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Enigma 1986
steel
89 x 10 x 10 inches
Collection of Homer & Durham Advertising,
Ltd., New York

Four Increments of 24" 1986
steel
99 x 7 x 7 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel, Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Vessel with Twist 1986
stainless steel
25½ x 8 x 7 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel, Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Tone Poem 1987
steel, lacquer on wood, and oil on wood
97 x 8 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Ruth Siegel, Ltd.,
New York, and Baumgartner Galleries,
Washington, D.C.

Photos: Peter Charles